



Supporting specific competencies through play



ECE resources

Effective play-based interactions depend first on teachers observing what children are doing, so that they can get involved in ways that support their efforts and enable additional learning, stimulate thinking, offer feedback at an appropriate level, and scaffold children's activity to a level just beyond what they can manage on their own.

This guide includes strategies you might use within play to support children's

- Social development
- Language
- Executive function skills
- Role play
- Creativity and thinking
- Exploration and discovery
- Subject knowledge development

Strategies for supporting social development through play

Children's social development progresses from associative or parallel play, in which there are limited interactions between children and little dialogue or eye contact, through to social play, where children play together but often in repetitive and limited ways, and then to highly social and cooperative play, in which social groups are relatively stable and united by a shared understanding of play goals, complex play themes, and sustained episodes of intellectually demanding play. Teachers can support the development of social competencies in play by:

- **Organising activities for interaction** with teachers and other children, and promoting children's collaboration, conversations, and interactions: for example, repeating what children say so that peers can understand them better, to support peer interactions and maintain play episodes.
- **Pointing out the consequences of social behaviours**, and encouraging children to express their feelings.
- **Prompting social behaviours** with specific cues such as 'I think he would like a turn', or 'Sarah is talking to you', which has been found to increase the development of social skills in both the target child and the peer. You might also offer suggestions on how to participate in a play activity with peers, or use questioning to help children start a play episode together.

Strategies for supporting language development

Play provides a useful context for children to practise using language by talking about their ideas and actions in play. Encourage language use in play by:

- **Inviting children to elaborate.** Ask questions that invite extended responses or that provoke ongoing inquiry to support children to use more language while playing. For example, if a child says they are building a bridge, ask them if they can describe what a bridge is. Ask questions to extend their thinking such as 'Can you tell me why you need a bridge here?' and 'What blocks will you need?', and 'How will you arrange them?'.
- **Modelling language.** Recast children's comments using more complex language, expanding on children's utterances by making them into complete sentences, for example, or adding adjectives. Circle back to children's ideas to provide repetition of concepts and language.
- **Offering new vocabulary** with definitions of words as well as new words, for example 'you're using the triangle shape, the one with three sides' or 'you are pedalling really vigorously, that means really fast'. Research shows that children are more likely to learn a word when provided with its definition.
- **Using wait time** to provide children with the opportunity to think about and respond to your questions and comments, and to convey the message that their thoughts are valued.
- **Developing shared attention** to sustain children's engagement in dialogue. Ensure interactions are reciprocal, two-sided and responsive, and help children to think, reflect, and verbalise, without aiming to lead to a correct answer.

Strategies to support executive function skills and self-regulation through play

Executive function skills include holding information in working memory long enough to complete a task, inhibiting impulses, managing distractions and being cognitively flexible, which means that children with these skills are more effective learners. Executive function skills develop throughout childhood but can be supported by games and activities including:

- **Peek-a-boo, hiding games, and rhymes** (particularly those with a surprise element to anticipate, such as the tickle at the end of 'Round and round the garden') for developing infants' working memory
- **Action rhymes and memory games** for developing toddlers' working memory
- **Imaginative role play, inventing and telling stories, card and board games, and games such as Simon says or Musical Statues** for supporting older children's executive function skills including inhibitory control, focusing attention and working memory.

Strategies to support role play

Role play shows a particular progression beginning with stereotypical and repetitive actions with realistic objects, and leading to increasing capacities for sustained episodes of imaginative play involving varied actions and roles, the symbolic use of props, and the creation of rules and logical scripts within a group. Some research suggests that young children do not always reach the mature level of sociodramatic play that is associated with many important learning outcomes. The following strategies can support children to progress to master or expert players:

- **Assume a role** in children's play (for example, be the patient while the child plays doctor) and elaborate and extend on activities and language. Plan questions to ask and actions to provoke to encourage children to add more detail and depth to the play, while allowing children to freely explore and control the role play.
- **Provoke children to plan or reflect on their play actions** and to translate them into narratives that others can understand and contribute to by asking questions such as 'how is it going?', 'what do

you need to do next?', 'what else might you do?', 'how else might you do it?', and 'are you sure?' Encourage children to talk about their thinking and use of language within the role play, in order to develop metacognitive (thinking about one's own thinking) and metacommunicative (thinking about one's own language use) capacities.

- **Show children how signs, tools and materials are used.** Broaden activities associated with role play, for example, by considering how to decorate a doctors' waiting room with leaflets, posters and advertisements, and introduce new tools into the play to introduce new concepts, for example, adding a tape measure for measuring patients' heights. Instruction that is embedded in play and relevant to performing play roles is found to generally be accepted by children when it supports their desire to play independently.
- **Assess and supplement children's personal experiences and knowledge** of the role play setting, roles and actions, so that play is not limited and stereotypical. For example, an expanded hospital play might include an ambulance driver, a lab technician, a pharmacist and a dietician; and patients might arrive at hospital with the family, or by ambulance or emergency helicopter. Build knowledge through field trips, videos, books and guest speakers, and help children to notice the different roles people take and the associated scripts of behaviour to help them enact roles, rather than just the resources and materials of the setting.
- **Model how to use non-realistic props in a symbolic way**, while gradually introducing more unstructured props and removing realistic ones, and eventually inviting children to make their own props. Change the meaning of an object in imaginative play (in a way that aligns to children's play intentions) to help children acquire the capacity to perceive things symbolically.

Strategies for encouraging creativity and thinking

Teachers can encourage imagination in all kinds of thinking, and use everyday and real problems as opportunities for inquiry. Children are more motivated by concrete 'here and now' questions, rather than abstract knowledge or long-term goals. Encourage creativity and thinking by:

- **Trusting children to have ideas.** Be careful not to do the majority of the work in play, which some research finds teachers are likely to do. Show appreciation for children's creativity during play.
- **Inviting children to imagine ideas, test and refine them**, using 'imagine if' scenarios for example, or scenarios for collaborative problem-solving which involve thinking and theorising as well as active physical engagement.
- **Encouraging children to draw on previous experience and existing knowledge** to relate new knowledge to the familiar. Ask children what something looks or is like, which is found to be more effective than asking what something is.
- **Creating opportunities for children to puzzle and wonder** about aspects of their world. Build on children's existing capabilities, experiences and interests.
- **Inviting children to think and express their ideas in different ways** (such as in experimenting, role-playing, drawing, or in conversation) in order to support them to make meaning from experience. Draw children's attention to the fact that they have different ideas and ways of thinking about the topic, to encourage metacognitive thinking. Help children think in complex ways (i.e. scientifically), and aim for sustained dialogues or cognitively challenging intellectual dialogue which promotes children's higher-order thinking skills.

Strategies to support exploration and discovery

Children can learn quite abstract ideas if they are relevant and presented in a concrete way through practical experience and exploration. Teachers can facilitate concept development and understanding by:

- **Using open-ended, exploratory comments and questions** or pointing out novel experiences or observations to build children's discovery of the attributes of materials and events.
- **Challenging children to constantly make meaning and sense** of their environment and interactions, and support children in interactions in which they construct new knowledge. You might do this by inviting children to make comparisons to help children to notice relations between ideas and things and to facilitate new understandings and interpretations, or to make predictions (asking 'I wonder what will happen if...' or 'If I do that, this will happen because...'), clarifying children's predictions and helping turn them into testable questions. You might also encourage children to reflect or make connections ('where have you see this before?'), review learning ('what did you find out?' and 'can you show me what happened when ...?') and plan future experiments ('what else might you try?'). Invite children to explain their reasoning during and after solving a problem, which can help you discover their misconceptions and level of understanding.
- **Ensuring children receive feedback** from you or from the task or activity. For example, using different implements to retrieve a toy floating in the middle of the water trough will give children immediate feedback about distance, the comparative length of different tools, and their problem-solving strategies.

Strategies to support subject knowledge development in play

While encouraging children's own thinking, problem-solving and reasoning, also keep a view to introducing content knowledge to children, which is found to add substance and depth to children's learning. The aim is to give children opportunities to engage with established bodies of knowledge at the same time that they have important concrete and particular experiences. Children's subject knowledge can be increased in sustained interactions with peers and teachers that:

- **Emphasise subject knowledge**, for example, when discussing colour-mixing, space travel, or the mechanics of car design.
- **Introduce concepts intentionally**, using children's everyday understandings, experiences and interests as a context.
- **Challenge children to use drawing or model-making** to reflect upon, organise and reorganise their knowledge.
- **Discuss the connections between children's play and learning** to help children develop their ideas about concepts. For example, note connections between children's play and books you have read ('Is this like the cave in the Bear Hunt story?') or between experiences you have shared together.
- **Relate children's discoveries to knowledge systems** such as science or maths. For example, when studying an ant, encourage children to consider both the particular (ant) and the general category (insect), the habitat in which the ant was found, and relations between the ant and its habitat and food source. Making such connections helps children develop rudimentary conceptual frameworks and theories in which different discoveries are interconnected.

References & Further Reading

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